

COMMENTARY

WESTERN SELF-INTEREST AND ISRAELI SELF-DEFENSE

They Coincide

HAL LEHRMAN

"If Israel is dissuaded from using the life force of their race to ward off the Egyptians until the Egyptians have learned to use the Russian weapons with which they have been supplied and the Egyptians then attack, it will become not only a matter of prudence but a measure of honor to make sure that they are not the losers by waiting."—Sir Winston Churchill

IN THE two months just past, the threat of Middle Eastern war has taken up fixed residence on the world's front pages. All the wisdom of the world's statesmen has made no measurable progress in allaying the crisis. In Washington, and to some extent still in London and Paris, policy remains muddled by the obsessive belief that Arab reasonableness can be obtained by gift, entreaty, and gentle admonition. In the United Nations, nobody is even looking

THE crisis in the Middle East cries for solution more urgently than ever, and HAL LEHRMAN, in the third of a series of articles, reports one proposed line of action. The first of the series, "Three Weeks in Cairo," appeared in February, and the second, "Is an Arab-Israeli War Inevitable?" in March. Mr. Lehrman, who is a well-known lecturer as well as political reporter and commentator, needs no introduction to our readers. Among the books he has written are *Russia's Europe* (1947) and *Israel: The Beginning and Tomorrow* (1952).

for solutions any more; the best to be hoped for—if East and West can compromise their differences—is some wordy and complicated stratagem which will have the dubious advantage of "gaining time." And in the Middle East itself the record shows a perilous decline of the Western position.

Britain's ignominious ejection from Jordan has begun. Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia have held semi-public deliberations on ways and means of speeding British departure and winning over Jordan to their side. Jordan has concerted with Syria on mutual military aid along their Israeli borders. Remote Yemen has been drawn into Egypt's system of military alliances with Syria and Saudi Arabia. The Cairo radio, not content with the trouble it has helped to make in North Africa, has begun to foment revolt as far away as Zanzibar. There is a brisk traffic of Soviet satellite instructors bound for Egypt to teach, and of Egyptian military teams bound for Eastern Europe to learn, the operation and maintenance of the complicated weapons obtained by Cairo at bargain prices from Prague.

The West, quite clearly, is simply muddling along, without a studied policy for the Arab-Israeli dispute—or for the larger threat of Arab-Soviet friendship and loss of the Middle East. In both areas, however, the interest of the free world, and the

national interest of the United States, are dangerously involved. The search for an effective policy is therefore obligatory, however futile the previous efforts have been.

AT THIS writing it is possible, by straining, to derive comfort from indications that Western capitals are beginning dimly to recognize the desirability of enabling Israel, for her hard cash, to purchase *some* weapons similar in quality to the new Egyptian arms. An elementary justification for this step would be Israel's obvious need to be able to defend herself. More important, it would dampen the Arabs' intoxication with their own increasing strength. The Egyptians are acutely aware of Israeli prowess in the field. If Cairo knows that the Israelis have obtained the means for counter-attack, it will not dare provoke an all-out war. Left-handedly, the State Department has intimated that it has "no objection" to sale of arms to Israel by the "traditional" suppliers of Middle Eastern arms, Britain and France.

The latter powers are described, with some reason, as considering this a hypocritical—and futile—ruse to divert Arab resentment from the United States. Nevertheless, there are some signs that narrow cracks may be developing in that Western wall which, except for clearance of some French jet planes and a miscellany of auxiliary items, has so far prevented Israel from acquiring the arms capable of confronting Egypt's Soviet equipment.

But it will take more than a thin trickle of modern weapons to keep Gamal Abdel Nasser's junta prudent, or give Israel the security to which she feels entitled in view of declared Arab hostility. Moreover, even full achievement of an arms balance can only have a negative value. It can dissuade the Arabs from making war—but it cannot compel them to make peace. Israel will still be confronted by the enervating drain of maximum preparedness. The West will still be harassed by Arab intransigence on all fronts, and Arab willingness to accommodate the Soviets will almost certainly grow, to the greater jeopardy of the entire Middle East.

IN A previous article in these pages (March) this writer examined—and noted the flaws in—the possible lines of action usually envisaged in any "tough" policy of political and economic sanctions which the West might adopt toward the Arabs. However, in some quarters familiar with the Arab mind it is felt that another means of bringing the Arabs to their senses lies close at hand.

Every non-Arab military observer in the Middle East—and every candid Arab observer as well—knows that the Arabs are actually more afraid of the Israeli soldiers, man for man, than they are of the whole might and power of West and East combined. They do not expect to have to fight the remote Americans, British, or Russians. But they know that a test of battle with the Israelis next door is a very real possibility. They have undergone such tests before, and they remember the results ruefully. Even now, with all their newly acquired massive armor, they are very respectful of their "Zionist" neighbor's military ability.

Not until the Arabs have grown considerably more proficient in the use of this equipment, and confident that they can propel it across the border in one massive knockout blow without the smallest chance of reprisal, will they cease regarding Israel as a holy terror. Meanwhile certain military experts—and even a section of sober Israeli opinion—are beginning to reflect on the possibilities of exploiting this military inferiority complex to deflate an Arab political arrogance which, unless checked, will end by knocking the last props out from under the Western position in the Middle East—and by ruining the Arabs as well, to the sole profit of the Kremlin.

The idea of playing on Arab respect for Israeli fighting skill to call the Arab diplomatic bluff against the West has not yet recommended itself to the West's own diplomats. There are many precedents for such diplomatic failure to see the obvious when the conclusions from the obvious require daring action. When the Nazis marched into the Rhineland, they could have been marched right out again if the British and French had

called their bluff—without a shot fired. When the Russians began gobbling up Eastern Europe in violation of World War II commitments, they could have been induced to disgorge if the British and Americans had called their bluff. (President Truman, later, called it in Iran with complete success and not an ounce of powder burned.)

Such bluffs are not challenged because the risks are too large; it takes imagination to perceive that the risks of allowing the bluff to stand, as evident in the examples above, are even larger. So runs the argument of certain qualified observers, in Israel and elsewhere. In the present case, Western policy-makers still cling to the notion that the Arabs can be wheedled, bribed, and maneuvered into "loyalty." Perhaps the French, fed up with Egyptian backbiting, might support a stern Western policy. But the French, with most of their effectives already involved elsewhere, are the weakest of the Big Three. Though the British are now disenchanted with Nasser and reportedly itching to deal sternly with him, they are so wedded to dependence on Arab friendship that they might, in exchange for the smallest bone, begin believing all over again in a policy of concessions. It is the State Department, above all, that remains hopeful that such a policy will succeed—and the State Department sets the direction of Western diplomacy in today's Middle East.

The State Department view recoils from any suggestion of a showdown with the Arabs. It persists in seeking to placate them so as not to "provoke" them into further collaboration with the Soviets. It rests on the assumption—negated by all previous experience with the Arabs—that they appreciate the generosity implicit in concessions and will not despise those who offer them. American diplomacy has not yet discovered that appeasing the Arabs in order to keep them out of Moscow's clutches will only make the Arabs more demanding—and more dependent on Moscow as the lever for the next turn of the screw on the West. Western willingness to finance Egypt's High Dam at Aswan, for instance, has merely

increased Arab enthusiasm for the Soviets, whose vague offer to help with the dam is credited with having forced the West's hand. In recent declarations, Premier Nasser has excelled himself in cockiness, and made no effort to hide his intention of working the Soviet bogey to the limit. Such cockiness is the direct result of the bowing and scraping by Western spokesmen in his anteroom.

Critics of Western policy hold that the way to stop losing the Middle East is to choke off the game of diplomatic blackmail which the Arabs are playing. And there are observers with no stake in the fate of Israel, except insofar as it involves that of the West too, who see in Israeli military superiority an effective diplomatic instrument by which to bring the Arabs to terms.

If the Arabs are not brought to terms—these same observers feel—the Arabs' own folly will eventually make them, as well as the Israelis, victims of the Soviets. Israel's existence—at least as a free society—would be snuffed out by the Sovietization of the Arab world. At a certain point on the road to Middle Eastern ruin, therefore, Israel will be compelled for the sake of sheer survival to throw off Western inhibitions and devise an independent policy of her own. That policy may include an attempt by Israel alone to call the Arab bluff.

How could the West wisely exploit the real and persisting Arab fear of Israeli battle superiority? Will a tactic that exploits that fear necessarily lead to war?

It suits Nasser's propaganda to assert that Israel has no reason for alarm over Egypt's armament because Israel is protected by the Anglo-Franco-American guarantee of 1950. The implication is that the West, and in particular the United States, shields the "Zionist" state. The fact is that the Tripartite Declaration, though woolly as to implementation, guarantees *all* existing Arab-Israeli frontiers, including the *Arab* sides of them. Egypt's saber-rattling, her small adventures along the Gaza strip, the incursions of the *fedayeen* suicide squads, the Syrian attacks on Israeli fishermen, the brandishing of fists

by Jordan's Arab Legion—all this is done on the assumption that, should the enraged Israelis venture on full-scale retaliation, the West would rush forward, under the Tripartite guarantee, and stop them. Israel would emerge with nothing gained except the stigma of aggressor. It is under the umbrella of the Tripartite Declaration, which Nasser and his friends profess to despise, that the Arabs have been able to embark with impunity on a massive arms program, to reject negotiation, and to proclaim that there can be no peace with Israel until she has accepted impossible terms.

Under this umbrella, too, Egypt has been able to bait the West and woo the Russians, secure in the assurance that Egypt's front with Israel cannot erupt because the West itself—absurd though it now may seem—is guarantor of a peace that the Arabs themselves refuse to recognize. As long as Egypt has only the confused and anxious West to worry about, she can flirt with Moscow as boldly as she likes.

But what if Nasser should suddenly find himself faced by a single-minded—and unhampered—Israel? How much leisure would he retain to plan new diplomatic maneuvers? Suppose that, on any morning during the next weeks, and wearing appropriate poker-faces, the ambassadors of France, Britain, and the U. S. in Cairo were to convene before the Egyptian Premier's desk and hold discourse with him somewhat as follows:

"In 1950 our governments announced they would apply sanctions against any aggression on frontiers and armistice lines around Israel. The purpose of this guarantee was to protect all parties and facilitate negotiations between Israel and the Arab states with a view to transforming the armistices into peace treaties. We are now compelled to note that this purpose has failed.

"We do not blame you—or Israel. We simply observe that there is no peace, and that our guarantee has not achieved the purpose for which we undertook it six years ago. Therefore, Mr. Prime Minister, as of 5 A. M. next Sunday, we are annulling the guarantee. We leave you and the Israelis to

settle your differences between you—without hindrance from outside. How you settle them, or do not settle them, is not our affair. We merely invite your attention, with the friendliest of motives, to the fact that your policy of non-negotiation with Israel may have unhappy consequences. When one party to a dispute persists in maintaining a state of belligerency, it runs the risk that the other party may eventually turn belligerent too. Mr. Prime Minister, we bid you good day. . . ."

The advocates of such a move concede that it is daring. How could the mid-20th century countenance such "ruthless" 19th-century diplomacy? And wouldn't a vacuum be created into which the Russians could enter? Foreseeing these disconcerting questions, the advocates of a Western policy based on Israel's fighting strength propose two further steps, one prior to the proposed colloquy with Nasser, one afterward.

THE first step would be to expose the UN's inability to obtain peace. (UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld's "success" in obtaining an Israeli-Egyptian cease-fire last month merely eased a current irritation temporarily; it brought no relief for the basic malady—absence of peace—which can flare up in fresh outbreaks any time.) Let a tripartite resolution at once be presented to the Security Council calling for direct Arab-Israeli general negotiations within a brief time limit. Unless the Soviets are prepared to lose all the advantages so far gained in Arab affections, they will veto this move. (A similar move in the General Assembly would be similarly defeated by the combined efforts of the Soviet and Arab blocs.) The UN thus having tried once again and failed, the three guarantor powers could then visit Nasser.

Immediately after withdrawal of the envoys from the Premier's presence, a joint note from Washington, London, and Paris could be sped to Moscow containing notification of the Tripartite Declaration's annulment, with the following addendum:

"We consider the Arab-Israeli dissension to be purely a local dispute. The locality

is situated in an area where our three governments and their nationals possess clear and established interests. Nevertheless, we will not intervene in settlement of the local dispute—and we are confident that no other government will intervene. Any such intervention will be regarded by us as a hostile act. . . .”

Would Moscow pick up this challenge? It can be argued that the Soviets would not need to. They could seize the opportunity to meddle (and improve their standing with the Arabs) simply by pouring more arms into Alexandria—a “commercial transaction” against which the West could legitimately take no exception. True. But there is a saturation point for a backward country like Egypt beyond which extra planes and tanks simply cannot be absorbed. A deluge of arms would not affect the Arab-Israeli issues right now—so long as the Israelis already had an adequate supply of the same types of weapon. It takes skilled personnel to handle such arms, and time to learn how. The Egyptians lack the know-how, and the Israelis, by speedily moving to call their bluff, would not give them the time.

But what if Soviet and satellite “volunteers” were ready to man Egypt’s new weapons? Wouldn’t that mean Egyptian willingness to fight—and, eventually, war with the West? In the light of the grim Western notice against a “hostile act,” it certainly would—which makes it extremely unlikely that Moscow would permit such “volunteering.” For the Soviets to defy the West under these circumstances, one would have to assume that they were ready and eager for war. If so, would they let the West pick the time? Or the place? Every adventure the Soviets have undertaken to date indicates that *they* pick the time and place. If they were seeking World War III, would they start it in the Middle East, where, of all conceivable theaters of action, they are most at disadvantage for bases and communication lines? Wouldn’t they, instead, seize West Berlin, or strike at Vietnam, South Korea, or any other point to which the Communist empire had easier access than to the Levant?

And wouldn’t they select a moment designed to give them the benefit of maximum surprise?

It makes no sense to suppose that the Soviets will sacrifice all this for the relatively minor advantage of stirring the Arab-Israeli pot. Nor can the West be charged with provocation if it serves notice that Soviet meddling would be a *casus belli*. The three Western powers have at least as much right to protect their interests in the Middle East as the Soviets have, say, in Eastern Europe. Any attempt from Moscow to replace the Tripartite guarantee by one of its own would be as impertinent—and provocative—as a Western attempt to inaugurate and supervise free elections in Bulgaria or Rumania. As a matter of fact, Moscow in mid-April actually denounced all projects to intervene in the Israeli-Arab issue. Thus the Soviets’ stated position—whatever it may be worth—suggests that, if anything, they would have to endorse the West’s annulment of the Tripartite guarantee as consistent with the ban on all intervention from outside. Assuming, then, that the West stands firm in its resolve to isolate the Arab-Israeli argument, the Russians can be confidently relied on to keep clear.

WHAT would Israel do? For the first time, she would argue her case with and against the Arabs on its merits and with full use of her bargaining power—unhampered by the prospect of Western restraint, discriminations, or sanctions.

She would, according to the advocates of such a showdown policy, remind Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon that each had pledged, in the armistices of 1949, to proceed with her from temporary armistice to permanent peace treaty—not to permanent belligerency. She would certainly invite them—one more time in a long series of such invitations—to sit, negotiate, and make peace with her. If her invitation were again spurned, she would demand at least that hostile acts by the armistice signatories—in particular Egypt—should cease. She would insist that the blockades at Suez and Eilat

be lifted as intolerable restrictions. Otherwise, Israel would serve notice, she would be compelled to draw the logical consequences from Cairo's assertions that Egypt was still at war with her. Israel would move to *defend* the armistice to which Egypt had agreed. Any continued or new violation of that armistice by Egypt would itself be *aggression*, and would justify full Israeli counter-measures.

What would Egypt do? She would not attack, the spokesmen for this line of action argue. On the contrary, there would be an even chance, according to them, that Nasser would attempt to grope his way to the conference table; faced suddenly by an actual showdown with an adversary whose proven superiority he knows, and against whom he has lost all protections from abroad, he would have eloquent reasons to seek the surer protections of a peace treaty. Could he do so without committing political suicide? It would be risky. But if he is as strong and popular inside Egypt as he claims to be, he should be able—by energetic propaganda and resolute police precautions—to accomplish the somersault convincingly. His biggest obstacle would be the hotheaded younger elements in the army—but even they are not unaware of Israeli prowess. Should the domestic perils of agreement to treat with Israel seem too formidable to Nasser, he would still have the choice of gradual retreat on the blockade and on other specific acts of belligerency. Such retreat could be covered by a noisy brandishing of arms to save face at home. Israel would certainly not mind the words as long as the deeds were satisfactory.

But, obviously, if no such satisfaction were given, then Israel would be compelled to move. Otherwise it would be *her* bluff that would be called. And obviously, her move would have to be larger than the usual "punitive" raid with limited attack and quick withdrawal. The move would have to be of sufficient size to force Egypt's compliance with her own pledges. This could very easily become the spark to a full-scale Arab-Israeli war—and this is where the spokesmen of

independent Israeli action have to face up to the full consequences of the line they propose. No competent military observer doubts that Israel would win such a war, but there is more than that to it.

NOBODY is more aware than the advocates, Israeli and non-Israeli, of this course of action that to contemplate war as a last resort to bring about an Arab-Israeli "settlement" sounds shocking and brutal. It is not the kind of proposal customarily made by enlightened people—certainly not in this era. But it must be understood that the advocates of a showdown with Egypt believe the alternative to it may be considerably more dreadful. If the Arabs continue their unrestricted arming against Israel and their diplomatic blackmail of the West, sooner or later the question will cease to be one of war or peace but simply of the date and dimension of the inevitable war. The later the decision, the weaker the Israelis (which also means the West) vis-à-vis the Arabs and the bloodier the ultimate struggle. The longer the present trend is permitted, the stronger the Soviets will grow in the Middle East, and the wider the boundaries of the eventual conflict.

But should Israel let herself be put in the position of fighting the West's battles single-handed? No responsible Israeli statesman has suggested that Israel be used in such a manner. Yet few sectors of Israeli opinion would find the idea unacceptable. To most Israelis, pulling the West's chestnuts from the fire would seem only incidental. Israel and the West have an identical degree of interest in ending the present Arab-Soviet threats. The proposed line of action, it is felt, would afford Israel release from an actual pressure and a prospective disaster that have already become nearly intolerable for her citizens to contemplate.

Two months ago—it is further argued—it might have been objected that Britain would never consent to drastic anti-Arab action. But Britain has gone a long way since Jordan gave Sir John Bagot Glubb his walking papers. The British are fighting

mad at Egypt for having largely instigated that move, and for other "anti-imperialist" acts on her part. They have been reported even ready to employ their troops in Jordan in the event of a further major effort to destroy British influence there. This is a spectacular toughening of attitude for a government which only a year ago talked itself into giving away the Suez Canal. The British, it is said in Israel and elsewhere, have not yet taken the full cure for that tropical disease of which the most sinister symptom is confidence in the pledge of Arab leaders; they still, for example, have illusions about Iraqi fidelity. But at this precise moment in their re-education, it is quite possible that they would cooperate in a plan to cut Nasser down to size by cancellation of the Tripartite Declaration.

The French, too, have suffered some rude revelations. Only last November a highly placed Frenchman in Cairo advised me ponderously that France "is in effect an Islamic power because of our great holdings in Moslem North Africa; we must therefore have an independent, and most careful, policy toward other Islamic powers such as Egypt." Today the French are so aroused about Algeria and so furious over Egyptian meddling in "Moslem North Africa" that they are inclined to be much less "careful" in treating with Nasser. And it is argued that, even if they and the British recoiled from annulling the guarantee outright, the United States could bring about the same result by withdrawing of her own accord; with the major partner gone, the Tripartite Declaration would lapse. If in a subsequent confrontation between Israel and the Arabs the United States remained aloof, it is most improbable that either Britain or France would choose to intervene unilaterally.

THE only really valid objection anticipated by proponents of the idea of a direct Arab-Israeli settlement is a simple but effective one. It is not, they feel, going to happen, because the United States—or at least the Eisenhower administration and the present State Department—will not permit it to happen.

Who would have dreamed the day would come, as it now has, when the British would be cocking a fist at the Arabs—and raging at the Americans, of all people, for seeming to play a devious game on the Arab side. Shades of Ernest Bevin and Harry Truman! Washington has become the bizarre champion of Arab sensibilities, while London, classic and indefatigable wooer of Arabs, has at last had its eyes opened to the hopelessness of it all.

The cumulative evidence that appeasement of the Arabs has only fanned their ardor for Moscow has not induced the State Department to change its course. There are risks in any policy of showdown with Nasser. These are the only risks the Department apparently can visualize. A blind Departmental eye is turned toward the greater risks that other observers foresee in a policy that avoids any crisis with the Arabs, which would then lead inevitably to greater disaster. It is easier to sit in a bus careening downhill out of control than to crawl through the window and jump.

The State Department at this moment does not even dare "offend" the Arabs to the extent of selling Israel a single airplane. Cancellation of the Tripartite Declaration is thus most unlikely under present circumstances. Nevertheless, discussion of such a move here serves to illuminate, as if by a lightning flash, the fact that Western policy today pinions Israel's arms behind her back while the Cairo junta, fed with Soviet weapons, looks forward to the time when it will be able to obliterate Israel at a blow.

The leaders of Israel—let there be no doubt about this—would have great moral and practical scruples against launching on an independent course that risks war, and they are, moreover, anxious not to forfeit the world's good opinion. Yet the largest evil which can befall any community is its annihilation—and survival is a moral value, too. If a stage is reached where the distance between Israel and destruction becomes even narrower than at present, diplomatic and other considerations will become secondary to the well-nigh supreme one of survival. The Arabs make

no secret of *their* intentions. As recently as last month the official Cairo newspaper *Al Goumhouriya* advised Secretary Hammarskjöld that peace was impossible until Israel ceased to exist.

Should the safeguarding of her life and freedom force Israel to call the Arab bluff on her own, what would be the gravest obstacle to victory? The might and majesty of the Arab armies? Hardly—if the war came before Egypt could bring the full force of her new armaments to bear. The major impediment would be the sanctions which the powers might impose on Israel as an "aggressor." Total censure, economic penalties, paralyzing blockade are all conceivable. These could drive Israel back to her point of take-off and despoil her of any advantage gained from battle. Armed intervention might even be employed, with sufficient speed to halt and repulse the Israeli forces before the issue could be decided in the field. In the clash, Israel would emerge sapped spiritually and physically, with her ultimate security more jeopardized than ever, and her moral credit gone.

The prospect is more than sobering to the Israelis, and also to their friends. If some Israelis can contemplate it as possible, if not imminent, it is only because the inaction of the West, with the State Department giving the cues, is allowing their country to drift into a most desperate situation. The simple truth is that Israel cannot accept a position of inferior strength in the face of neighbors sworn to her destruction. Until the threat of being reduced to such a position is eliminated, counsels of desperation (which seem less desperate than their alternative) will receive more and more of a hearing from Israelis.

MEANWHILE it is all-important—and here I speak for myself and my own assessment of the situation—that Israel's cause be better presented to the American public than it has been so far. The Israelis—all the Arab propaganda to the contrary notwithstanding—have not shown themselves adept at public relations. More important, neither have the

several American organizations and the numerous American friends of Israel working energetically to present her case. Otherwise, the dangerous impression might not have arisen that it is the Israelis, and not the Arabs, who are the chronic aggressors—and that aid to Israel would hurt American interests in the Middle East.

Two things need to be brought home to American public opinion by friends of democracy in the Middle East. First, Washington's negative *behavior* toward Israel (as distinguished from Washington's pious *declarations*) is strengthening the Arabs militarily and encouraging them to believe that they may launch an all-out blitz—and get away with it—just as soon as they feel confident enough of a crushing superiority in arms and alliances. Second, the one way to salvage the Western position in the Middle East—and avoid loss of the area to the Soviet—is to reverse the present State Department policy of Arab appeasement.

Western diplomatic timidity towards Nasser and his allies will only encourage them further into the Soviet embrace. Advocates of Israel's security must lift themselves out of their rut of special pleading and shopworn slogans: these can no longer convince or persuade. Nor are they pertinent. Aid to Israel is not the paramount point. It is aid to the United States that matters now. The State Department, in effect, is telling Americans that the Arabs must be placated or else the United States is threatened. Let Americans be told instead that the State Department's present policy of appeasement will only destroy American security in the Middle East.

This is the truth: that *only a resolute confrontation of the Arabs will help America*. One vital element of such a confrontation is American support of Israel's right to security and peace. Not for Israel's sake, but for America's.

[This is the third of a series of articles by Mr. Lehrman based on his recent tour of the Arab states and Israel. A fourth article will follow.]